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ABSTRACT

This study examined what teachers needed to learn to teach in new ways and how teachers developed those capacities. It also investigated the additional skills and orientations teachers needed to take on leadership roles and how teacher leaders acquired their ability to lead their colleagues. Data came from a 2-year study of 10 exemplary teacher leaders who had played significant roles in their districts' and states' standards reform initiatives. Results indicated that ongoing, high quality professional development experiences played an important role in their careers. Their ability to collaborate with peers and to become more reflective practitioners was enhanced by powerful professional development. These experiences also expanded their professional networks. At the end of the 2-year data collection, the 10 teachers met to discuss the findings. During the discussion, they examined what differentiated excellent teachers from teacher leaders. Besides high levels of expertise, collaboration, reflection, empowerment, and flexibility, teachers needed to develop sophisticated expertise in pedagogical content knowledge and a professional network to support ongoing learning in order to be effective leaders. The encouragement of respected mentors and colleagues, coupled with continuous nourishment of their intellectual interests through rigorous learning opportunities, were the keys to their success. (Contains 23 references.) (SM)

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ED 444 945

# What Differentiates an Excellent Teacher From a Teacher Leader?

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**What differentiates an excellent teacher from a teacher leader?**

In 1995, Ann Lieberman astutely observed:

> What everyone appears to want for students—a wide array of learning experiences that engage students in experiencing, creating, and solving real problems, using their own experiences and working with others—is for some reason denied to teachers when they are learners. (p. 591)

At the same time that standard staff development offerings were deemed to be uninspiring and woefully inadequate, our fourth National Education Goal (1994) identified professional development for teachers as a top priority for furthering education reform:

> By the year 2000, the nation's teaching force will have access to programs for the continued improvement of their [sic] professional skills and the opportunity to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to instruct and prepare all American students for the next century.

While the role of professional development in school reform has received an enormous amount of attention, (Leiberman, 1995; Little (1993); McLaughlin (1994); Newmann & Wehlage (1995) surprisingly, we know very little about what a coherent curriculum (Cohen & Ball, 1999) would look like to enable teachers to learn, not only new technical knowledge and skills, but also to develop new social norms among colleagues to create professional learning communities. We know even less about the kinds of professional learning opportunities that foster leadership within the teaching force.

We hoped that by studying the career development of recognized teacher leaders that we could identify the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that enable teachers to use standards to improve teaching and learning in diverse urban classrooms. The goal of this research project was to understand what is entailed in learning to change practice--what it takes for teachers to learn to teach in new ways, and how teachers develop those capacities. Furthermore, we wanted to understand what additional skills and orientations were needed to take on leadership roles, and how teacher leaders acquired their ability to lead their colleagues to achieve the goals of this ambitious reform.

The findings reported here are based on a two-year in-depth study of ten exemplary teacher-leaders who have played significant roles in their districts' and states' standards reform initiatives[1]. After two years of studying the careers of these teachers, we were confident that we could identify many of the critical abilities that these teachers had developed as well as many of the sources of their professional learning. It was evident that on-going, high quality professional development experiences played a central a role in their careers. As we studied how these teachers had developed their extensive knowledge and skills in their subject areas, their ability to collaborate with peers, and to

[1] See the Symposium Overview introducing this group of four papers for a description of the research design, sample selection, and research methodology.

become reflective practitioners, we found that in most cases we could trace these capabilities back to powerful professional development experiences. Moreover, through these intensive professional learning experiences, these teachers expanded their professional networks, which often led to even more extensive professional opportunities. In addition, at critical junctures during their careers, each of these teachers benefited from the support and encouragement of significant mentors who recognized their talent and dedication and who took an active role in shaping the career development of these promising teachers. As they refined these skills, they acquired a strong sense of empowerment; these teachers grew increasingly confident in their ability to make a difference in the lives of their students and in their work with fellow teachers.

At the end of the two-year data collection process, we brought all ten teachers together to assist us in a critical review of our observations. To facilitate this process, we developed a conceptual framework[2] that seemed to capture many of the essential abilities these teachers possessed. We hypothesized that only when teachers develop a high level of a) expertise; b) collaboration; c) reflection; d) empowerment; and e) flexibility, could they become effective leaders. As the group of teacher leaders reflected on the proposed framework by integrating it with their own professional journeys and those of their colleagues, they raised the question, what differentiates an excellent teacher from a teacher leader?

Rachel[3] shared her analysis with the group:

> We searched for the types of experiences and critical junctures, which led us to being teacher leaders. The more I looked at [the framework], I did not feel it defined teacher leaders. It defined a good teacher. So our group was really looking at where was the transformation between good teacher and teacher leader, and how was that different, what distinctions would need to be made. Formal education is sort of a given, that people have a certain amount of formal education, and they're trained in their content area, hopefully. And they continue to study and learn, whatever shape that formal education may take, but it is the types of professional development that we've received that singles us out to then take a perspective that a teacher leader has. And there are all kinds of things that I'm hearing around the room that express what that might look like. For me, it was communication skills, because I'm an introvert [....] Without those, I was a teacher without a voice. I could be a great teacher inside my classroom. But I could not lead somebody else. So this takes on all sorts of shapes and sizes.

Her analysis made it clear that there was something missing in our framework. Leadership seemed to be an illusive quality, one that was difficult to define in the form of a collection of skills and abilities. Not only was it a challenge for these teachers to identify what they know and do as leaders, they also struggled to articulate how they had

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[2] For a more detailed description of this framework, see Snell & Swanson, 2000.
[3] All names of teachers and schools that appear in this paper are pseudonyms.

become leaders, perhaps because it was hard to be reflective about "arriving at a place they had not really intended to go." In most cases, teacher leaders have had to construct their own course of professional learning. For example, as Kathy Sullivan reflected on her own career, she found it somewhat frightening that her own career development appeared to be quite accidental and haphazard. One of her most important professional communities evolved rather organically when a group of colleagues began coming to her room for lunch each day. She noted with some dismay that the only professional "accountable talk,"[4] she encountered in her job was over lunch with five or six great colleagues. During these thirty-minute lunches the teachers talked about books they were reading, they argued over portfolio assessment, they shared curriculum, they talked about each other's teaching, they looked at student work together. As the "hostess" of this daily gathering, Kathy often worried when people left angry, but she learned to relax because they always came back. To her, that was a sign that they had developed a real learning community based on collegiality and trust. They could disagree and argue, because they were discussing issues that were worthwhile--ideas that really mattered in their professional practice.

While we found that excellent teachers, as well as teacher leaders, need to develop high levels of knowledge and skills captured in all of the dimensions of our framework, to be effective teacher leaders something more was required. The sense of empowerment that they felt in their ability to effect change was an important part of leadership, but it was the research on leadership in the field of business (Kouzes & Posner, 1995; Kouzes & Posner, 1999) that helped us articulate the essential leadership qualities that these teachers demonstrated.

Since the 1980s, Kouzes & Posner (1993; 1995; 1999) have been studying the practices of individuals when they are functioning at their personal best as leaders. They've collected thousands of case studies of admired leaders and they have consistently found that when getting extraordinary things done, leaders employ five practices. They: 1) challenge the process; 2) inspire a shared vision, 3) enable others to act; 4) model the way, and 5) encourage the heart. They found that all five practices are essential to effective leadership, and that all five practices contribute to explaining why certain leaders are successful.

These researchers reminded us that leadership is not about a position or a place, and that it is more than a set of skills and techniques. Kouzes & Posner (1995) define leadership as the art of mobilizing others to want to struggle for shared aspirations. It is an attitude that expresses a sense of responsibility for making a difference. When individuals are clear about their own personal values, they are motivated to act on their convictions and it creates the passion that drives teachers to serve their students and the profession. Ultimately, leadership comes from the heart – it is the passion that drove these teachers to serve their students and their colleagues. It was also this passion, bolstered by their high level of expertise that earned them the respect and commitment of their professional community.

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[4] Rothman, R. The Principles of Learning, in Standard-driven curriculum: Presenter's manual.

These teachers did not hesitate to express their heartfelt emotions. Oscar explained it this way:

> I'm involved with what I love, which is history. And if you're doing something you love, I think at the end of the day, it's really a wonderful feeling. I had a parent stop me on Saturday morning and say, 'You know my daughter is very low key about teachers, they're just not cool at eighth grade anymore. It's not cool to admit that you like a teacher. But she said that she loves your class because you're passionate about what you do. And that's what makes it exciting for her.' When I know I'm reaching a kid, a kid is taking an interest in this and jumping through hoops because I'm putting the hoops out there and they sense my passion about history and how important it is, then it's worthwhile. I know I have an effect on kids, and I know that they know I care about what I do, and they know I care about them.

Similarly, Elizabeth described the intrinsic rewards she gets from her leadership work:

> When you know that something has made such a profound difference in your life--it speaks from the heart. And I think that's why it has been so successful. Because you can say, 'I know because I've done it and I love it and I've seen the power of the change.' And I think it speaks for itself. Everywhere we've gone, we've received standing ovations. It's just been "wow," because you speak from the heart. Working with teachers has been really a joy.

These teachers are passionate about their subject matter; they are passionate about kids and the desire to make a difference in their lives. It is this passion that fuels their enthusiasm for sharing their excitement for learning with both their students and their peers. While this finding may raise questions about whether only a select few have the internal drive or natural instincts to be leaders, Kouzes & Posner contend that "heart" can be taught and that leadership is everybody's business. In fact, they devote an entire book to Encouraging the Heart,[5] in which they document how leaders encourage the hearts of their constituents and what a powerful force it can be in achieving high standards. Similarly, by analyzing the career journeys of these teacher leaders it is possible to document the influence of powerful professional development experiences and the encouragement of significant mentors who engendered in them an intense commitment to improving educational opportunities for all children.

Kouzes & Posner note that leaders create relationships between themselves and their staff as well as between individuals and their work. Encouraging the heart is about the importance of linking rewards and appreciation to standards of excellence. This is why,

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[5] Kouzes, J. M., & Posner, B. Z. (1999). Encouraging the heart: A leader's guide to rewarding and recognizing others. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

they insist that encouragement is essential to sustaining people's commitment to an organization and its goals. In their analysis, Kouzes & Posner have identified seven essentials of encouraging that describe how leaders give of their hearts so that others may fully develop and experience their own. We found that these essentials could also help us understand how education leaders who made the investment, were able to foster the leadership of our ten teachers, and how, in turn, these teachers have internalized these practices to encourage the hearts and minds of their colleagues.

The seven essentials they identified are strategies for keeping hope alive, because hope spurs on achievement. When leaders do their best to encourage the heart, they:

1) Set clear standards
2) Expect the best
3) Pay attention
4) Personalize recognition
5) Tell the story
6) Celebrate together
7) Set the example

The authors explain how these practices work:

> Leaders keep hope alive when they set high standards and genuinely express optimism about an individual's capacity to achieve them. They keep hope alive when they give feedback and publicly recognize a job well done. They keep hope alive when they give their constituents the internal support that all human beings need to feel that they and their work are important and have meaning. They keep hope alive when they train and coach people to exceed their current capacities. Most important, leaders keep hope alive when they set an example. There really is nothing more encouraging than to see our leaders practice what they preach (p.xx).

**Significant mentors who encouraged their hearts**

The stories of our ten teachers provide countless examples of how their hearts and their passion have driven them to lead their colleagues in this reform effort. Their career journeys also document how they learned these ideals from significant mentors who encouraged their hearts and intensified their commitment to making a difference. An examination of the relationships between these teachers and their influential mentors reveals how their mentors employed many of these seven essential practices in encouraging the hearts of their protégés.

Our teachers taught us that mentors could be found in different places and in different roles. Regardless of the positions they occupied, all of the teachers identified at least one significant mentor as having played a major role in their career development. These mentors were important for either creating or connecting these teachers into a professional community. While their professional communities vary, they all found

sources of professional encouragement and support, and most found multiple sources. In a few cases, where none existed, these teachers have even managed to create their own. While mentoring is a powerful strategy for learning, these relationships have been especially effective because they went beyond a teaching relationship; they were both personal and professional and they contributed to the development of professional networks and collaborative cultures that fostered leadership development.

Three of our teacher leaders were fortunate to work for principals who encouraged them to fulfill their potential as leaders. Five of the participants found a mentor in a university professor who inspired them and made the effort to nurture their learning and their career. Six of the participants identified other education professionals, usually specialists in their content area, who challenged them and stimulated their thinking while providing opportunities for professional growth. Finally, four of the teachers acknowledged colleagues in their own building for helping them grow as professionals.

The last situation where teachers themselves created a professional community is intriguing because this evolved without leadership from a strong principal, and because it happened across disciplines. Three of the teacher leaders in this study, Oscar, Annie, and Kathy, were part of a remarkable collegial culture at Mountain View Middle School. This is the school where Kathy opened her classroom to colleagues for lunch, establishing the opportunity for dialog. A couple of stimulating professional develop opportunities fueled their enthusiasm, and soon these experiences began to snowball, leading to new opportunities.

Annie described the difference these experiences have made in her career:

> This school has provided a great deal of opportunity for professional growth, which has kept teaching much more exciting that I thought it could ever be. We've been allowed to develop curriculum, try curriculum out in our classrooms, and share ideas. I think that's one of the reasons why I've stayed at this school, just for the opportunities for professional growth. I think that being involved in different projects, it isn't so much that they give you the materials as they force you to think about what you're doing and how you can change what you are doing to be more effective with kids. It also makes it more stimulating for you. [....] We work well together because we respect each other and we like each other. We spend time writing curriculum during the summer, we have ongoing relationships and we're in and out of each other's classrooms. We talk about what we do. We share the kid's work. We ask for help to make it better. It's those kinds of ongoing conversations that keep us stimulated and trying to work harder, work better.

Part of what makes this collaboration at feasible Mountain View is structural. They have worked hard to have common preps to accommodate conferences with parents and students, and to plan together. But the most important factor enabling this arrangement to work is cultural. One member of this group articulated the influence that shared high

expectations have had on him, and recognized in turn, the responsibility he now has for socializing the next generation of teachers into the norms of their learning community.

> We have to develop communities of expectation and performance and effort, and we have to help each other to do it, but we also have to do it in a way that we're reminding each other on a daily basis why we're here and what level of performance is expected. [....] There is a culture of people at this school who have very high standards for themselves and their students, who are active professionally outside of the classroom with their colleagues, in their subject areas, who will pursue things for themselves, as a professional because it will benefit kids. And they participate because it's good to do it, and because it keeps you seeing the need to grow and change.

Oscar, the newest member of this collaborative culture, was fortunate to find a mentor in the classroom next door to his first classroom. That teacher set the example by his passionate story telling and engagement in history, which captivated his students. He also mentored Oscar by plugging him into a network of professional opportunities that had a remarkable effect on Oscar's development as a teacher. Oscar noted that, "If I look at the wealth of professional experiences I've had, it's amazing how many of them that my mentor has been responsible for opening the doors for me."

His mentor was able to promote him and help him get onto a statewide assessment team to write test questions for the state exam. He helped him get involved in the National history standards program, and to serve on the state's textbook adoption committee.

> He was really the best possible person for me to meet because he had a lot of qualities that I didn't have. He knew I had this background in history, but he also knew that it would take a while before I felt confident enough to do certain things. And working with him for a couple of years really helped me. Not only did he share lessons and strategies, but there was a sense--teaching next to him--that there are two people teaching American history. I'm the rookie. I have to get my act together to be good enough so that when I walk in here the kids know they're lucky. I really think that had a powerful impact on me, and that sense of expectation that was built in. He never said anything other than I was doing a wonderful job. But there was a sense of wanting to do a quality job, because I saw it being done next to me. [...] I think a powerful motivation for human beings is the approval of their peers.

Similarly, at Jordan Middle School in another part of the country, Kate credits her more experienced colleagues for mentoring her when she began her teaching career. Her mentor was a real expert at instructional strategies and developing interesting curriculum. The two of them shared a room so it gave Kate numerous opportunities to observe and be observed. And now as the senior member of the department, she consciously mentors the young teachers who have joined her in recent years. Kate noted that the significant

mentors in her career paid attention to what she did, took a personal interest, and recognized the effort that she made, as well as modeled best practices:

> The people who have a lasting effect on you are the kind that see way beyond their job and they're good with people and they're willing to listen. They not only lead great programs, but they learn to listen, and they are supportive of the people they pull in to do the work. Without exception, the people who work best in those jobs are the ones who pull in talent and who utilize them well.

Half of the teachers in the study found university faculty who inspired them and shaped their approach to teaching. Christy's story provides perhaps the strongest example of the powerful influence one professor made in her career development. Christy's mentor was the instructor of her reading methods class in her credential program. She helped Christy recognize that reading was always a love of hers, and because she believed in following her heart, Christy's relationship with reading and her mentor continues to grow. When her professor came in to teach, Christy recalled,

> She was always prepared. She knew her material cold, and she really pushed her students. She wasn't going to give you an A; you had to earn it. And when you earned it, you knew it, and you were proud of it. Even though our relationship is now more on the level of peers, she is the kind of educator I always wanted to be like.

This instructor touched Christy's heart by maintaining high standards and holding students accountable. But the relationship didn't end there. Recognizing Christy's passion, her professor identified opportunities to foster Christy's career by recruiting her for challenging jobs, first through grant funding and later as an adjunct faculty member where she could share her expertise with prospective teachers.

After teaching for two years in a private school while she was finishing her credential, Christy went to work in the private sector for a year and a half, but her mentor lured her back into the classroom with an ideal job funded by a grant that her professor had written. For two and a half years she taught reading classes with 13 students per class, and during her prep periods and after school she ran a peer-tutoring program. Other teachers began to notice the success she was having with students and gradually teachers began inviting Christy into their classroom to help with reading strategies in the content areas. When the staff voted to go to a seven period day to establish a reading class for every seventh grade student, they also agreed to use building funds to create a reading resource position for Christy. This achievement is all the more remarkable when one looks at the conditions under which Christy was working. Madison Junior High was the quintessential dysfunctional school. They had had four principals in five years. Christy even described one of her principals as her "anti-mentor." While their relationship was more often antagonistic than not, his influence was profound. She explained,

> He taught me that, regardless of whom the principal is who comes here, if your dream is strong enough, and you're strong enough, it's going to stay.

Yet, the challenges to overcome were daunting. Many of the teachers had retired on the job. Cynicism and negativity reigned. Christy began working with one teacher at a time to create a more professional culture at her school. She went into colleagues' classrooms only when invited, but she never failed to respond to calls for assistance. She created a book club with interested teachers to begin to change the dynamics at the school. Fortunately for Christy, her fifth principal was an instructional leader who believed in Christy's dream and for the first time in her career she finally had administrative support.

Kate, Amber and Samuel also found university faculty who inspired them and encouraged them to pursue their interests. Kate found an expert in gifted and talented education who nourished her concern for the emotional needs of gifted students. Getting her masters degree under her tutelage provided a focus and renewed commitment to teaching. More than the instructional strategies that Amber learned from her math methods professor, she was introduced to a philosophy and perspective of the goals of math reform. Throughout her career, he remained a trusted adviser, connecting her with professional learning opportunities to help her continuously improve her practice. Similarly, during Samuel's graduate work in science education, he was encouraged by a professor to develop his talent in writing curriculum.

Elizabeth, not only benefited from interactions with two influential university professors, but she was also fortunate to have the support of an exceptional principal. As the department head, Elizabeth Locke led her colleagues through a critical look at the effectiveness of the history department. The results were disturbing, and because of the high standards she holds for herself as a professional, she couldn't live with the status quo. Her principal encouraged her to apply for a state demonstration grant to secure the resources needed to strengthen the history department. The grant enabled Elizabeth and her colleagues to contract with university faculty to work with them to develop a stronger grasp of history. They also participated in a three-week history project at a nearby university. This in-depth explorations of history strengthened Elizabeth's resolve and commitment to her work, inspired by leaders in education who set the example:

> To sit down and talk to an archaeologist about their discipline and what they're doing, researchers who are realizing now that rice didn't come over from Asia, it came over from Africa and they explain the evidence that taught us this. Sitting down with prominent history scholars and talking about social history and the standards and why there was so much controversy. Then listening to him say, 'I really want to hear what you think because we're going to back to the drawing board and really work on this. I really want to hear your critical feedback.' It became one of those moments for me when I realized that to really grow, you have to view teaching as a process and be open to critical feedback. And to see

> this icon asking for help from teachers was just – my jaw was just dropping.

Elizabeth also benefited from being able to hire a professor to be a coach for the history department in analyzing student work. She explained the difference it made to have an outside expert work with them on a regular basis for two years.

> She challenges us by bringing in really interesting articles. She has the background in the humanities and she knows the research. She knows how to ask the right questions. 'What is it exactly that you want the kids to do?' 'What does meeting the standard look like?' Our big focus is on those kids who are not meeting the standards and interventions for them.

As her comments reveal, in addition to the intellectual stimulation provided by university faculty, the support and recognition of her principal reinforced Elizabeth's dedication to her work:

> He really believes in the project. And he watched the demo grant and just couldn't get over what it accomplished. He's incorporated a similar approach into his building plans. He decided this year that every department gets $5,000 to spend on their own professional development, and each department could develop their own plan.

Elizabeth has been a successful leader because she has internalized the supportive practices of leaders who have inspired her. She sets the example and she pays attention to others' needs and perspectives. As one of her colleague described, Elizabeth believes in her colleagues' capacity to learn to help all students achieve at high levels:

> She respects all of us, respects our opinions, and she listens to us, and she is a role model. She shows us her vulnerable side, and she's so kind that you want to do nice things for her… It's like the Confucian model, she's very good and upright, and so we are too. She's very giving to us and would help you with anything. She shares all of her lessons and assessments; she really helps other teachers improve. I feel very loyal to her, just because of who she is, her character. She goes above and beyond. She has people over to her house to celebrate, she brings food every week to department meetings, and that shows she really cares about us. And because she's always striving to do better, it motivates me to want to do my very best too. She's so effective because of her interpersonal skills, which are a combination of her knowledge, skills, passion, and her personality—it just motivates the rest of the department to get better too.

Elizabeth's cookies and brownies are much appreciated because the department meets after a long day, and they all need an energy boost at that point, but also because it shows she cares about her colleagues. However, the reason they keep coming week after week

is because of the intrinsic rewards they receive. The knowledge and expertise they gain are empowering. As one of her colleagues proclaimed,

> I just think this is the very best professional development there is. To be analyzing what other teachers and students are doing – by analyzing other people's work, you improve yourself.

Support from a principal who has a vision for the school and who encourages the staff to enhance its personal and professional skills to accomplish their goals can greatly facilitate school improvements and the development of teacher leaders. Like Elizabeth, Leann and Rachel have also been fortunate to work with principals who believed that the school could only provide a rich learning climate for students if it also provided opportunities for staff to learn and grow as professionals.

Rachel's principal saw the state's demonstration grant program as a vehicle for generating professional development experiences for teachers. Recognizing her talent and dedication, he encouraged Rachel to expand her leadership horizons beyond the school and the district, rewarding her with extensive opportunities to grow as a teacher and a leader.

Leann's principal was also an instructional leader who provided extensive opportunities for professional growth. She conducted schoolwide training in meaning-making strategies to ensure that all teachers had the tools needed to reach all kids, and to develop shared beliefs about students' ability to learn. All teachers were encouraged to attend professional conferences and to seek more advanced training in their content areas. By pursuing more specialized study, Leann, along with many of the teacher leaders, found mentors outside of her school, among education professionals in her content area. In some cases these mentors were curriculum leaders who nurtured their potential by connecting them with both stimulating professional development experiences as well as leadership opportunities, such as serving on standards and assessment committees, or leading standards-based workshops for other teachers.

Mentors not only enhance teachers' pedagogical content knowledge, they also teach profound lessons about paying attention to human needs. Sammi's extensive experience in bilingual settings has strengthened her cultural sensitivity and expertise in understanding the learning needs of language minority students. During a stint as a resource teacher, Sammi was inspired by the professionalism of teachers leading the district's Cambodian bilingual program, even while enduring substantial discrimination. Throughout, their commitment to the children remained steadfast. These observations motivated Sammi to use her expertise to address the needs of second language students. Toward this goal, she made a three-year commitment to learn to do Reading Recovery in Spanish. She went to Tucson in the summer to train with the developers of the Spanish program, who had worked with Marie Clay to translate the program into Spanish. Sammi shared the power of this learning experience:

> Reading Recovery talks about constructing and reconstructing. So I've deconstructed everything I've ever known, because I had to do it in another language. And I got to be very good at it. I got to be trained by the people who put it together. So I worked with them for the summer, and then I came back and did it in my classroom. I met periodically with the trainer from the county, and they visited me and they videotaped me. It was so interesting, and they were wonderful to me. It was a great experience. Every inch of the way, they supported us; they patted us on the back. They said we know things are tough. It was hands-on working with kids, and they noted, 'look at what the kids are doing, look at how the kids are improving.'

Sammi brought these lessons with her when she moved to middle school. She came because she shared the same values as the principal, who recruited her, and who is also deeply committed to literacy. She knows that there needs to be a match between her personal values and the leadership of the school if she is going to be able to give her best.

What distinguishes the influence of significant mentors in these teacher's careers is that their mentors have willingly reached out, they have gone into these teachers' classrooms, they have shared materials, and they have invited the teachers to be part of their own professional work. These mentors have set the standard by modeling exemplary practices. Mentors promote professionalism by establishing high expectations and nurturing teachers who aspire to excellence. They provide exciting opportunities for teachers to learn and grow which yield their own intrinsic rewards. Unfortunately, too few teachers have the benefit of effective leaders to guide their careers. If the passion and enthusiasm that young teachers bring to the profession is not nurtured, potential teacher leaders will never develop.

Interestingly, Katzenmeyer & Moller (1996) suggest that a reliance on outside experts disempowers teachers. Perhaps this is true when reliance becomes dependence on "professional" staff developers, but the experiences of all of our teachers indicates that the intellectual insights gained from experts in their field were invaluable in pushing them to expand their horizons, generating new ideas that empowered them to create more exciting and challenging learning opportunities for students (See also Huberman, 1995). As one teacher reflected,

> Whether it's history or language or reading or whatever, when you can go to the source, when you can be a part of the learning, when you can learn for yourself, and when you feel you have something to contribute, it is an incredible powerful learning experience.

We also found that an examination of some of the rich and powerful learning opportunities that our sample of teachers has experienced, many of which were made possible through connections provided by their mentors, demonstrates how regular intellectual stimulation engenders commitment to the profession. The intrinsic rewards

derived from growing and exceeding their current capacities imparts renewed enthusiasm and excitement for the teaching.

**Influence of powerful professional development experiences:**

The most powerful professional development opportunities were those where teachers were treated as scholars – when teachers participated in some form of learning community as mathematicians, as historians, as writers, as scientists, or as professional educators. High quality, content-rich learning generates excitement for learning and builds teachers' agency and motivation when they can integrate that learning into their classroom practice to enhance student learning. Teachers are able to share their enthusiasm with students when they are confident of their command of the material. Specialized training in one's area of expertise brings people together who share a passion for the content and taps into teachers' original reason for going into teaching—their original love of science, of mathematics, of history, or reading—by providing the intellectual challenge to keep teachers excited about teaching and learning.

In the case of the teachers at Mountain View Middle School, it is difficult to identify the stimulus that ignited the collaborative professional culture that developed there. There is, of course, an element of self-selection due to the initiative of individuals. Most people go into teaching for altruistic reasons, because they want to make a difference in the lives of children. But we know that all too often, teachers burn out and disengage or become disenchanted (Huberman, 1991). Mountain View found a way to keep that spirit alive, perhaps because they had a core of five or six teacher leaders who nourished each others'determination. In 1992, there were two powerful professional development projects that created a synergy for generating instructional change at the school. They received a significant grant to participate in a middle school reform project, which provided monies for professional development. As a result, they were able to fund travel to professional conferences, and the entire school was trained in Writing to Learn, (Bimes-Michalak, 1998) an interdisciplinary writing program, based on high expectations, high support, and high content. While the content of Writing to Learn provided a strategy for specific instructional changes, the process stimulated organizational changes in the way teachers worked and learned together (Fullan, 1991). Several teachers described the experience as the best staff development they had ever had:

> Writing to Learn had probably the greatest impact on my instruction because it was schoolwide. We developed a common language, which really made us a cohesive group and fostered collegiality.

During the same year, three of the Mountain View teachers, Kathy, Annie, and another outstanding teacher-leader were invited to participate in PACE (Performance Assessment Collaboratives for Education), a four year project developed at Harvard University. The PACE project began as an exploration of the potential of portfolios to assess what students know. It was not a well-formulated package, where teachers were taught what to put in them, or how to assess them. Rather, teachers along with administrators and

assistant superintendents learned together by listening to lectures, analyzing student work for substance and evidence of learning. The experience left the teachers with a great deal of questions about how to change curriculum to allow kids to showcase their learning. Kathy explained both the challenge and the pay off from their investment:

> In PACE we really grappled with portfolios over an extended period of time, and we are still talking about portfolios. But it was four years of work with the same people and that's really an intense kind of staff development.

During the course of the project, the participants were expected to engage in scholarship and delve into the research, and then use what they learned in developing their curriculum and their instructional practice. Annie emphasized the uniqueness of this learning opportunity:

> We were also able to read current research, which, as an educator, you don't have an opportunity to read professional articles on learning theories, brain development and what kinds of successful teaching practices are going on across the nation. It's sort of been an ongoing education.

The three of them were able to bring back what they were learning to share with the rest of the staff. The connections they made between the goals of Writing to Learn and the portfolio project and their enthusiasm about the possibilities, motivated others to work together in developing a school-wide portfolio to document student learning over time.

The team of three from Mountain View's initial work with the Harvard project began with PACE, but their involvement with the group has continued as new grant monies have been obtained. They have also been involved in two curriculum-writing projects. The first one provided opportunities for teachers to work with experts; Kathy worked with professional journalists, and Annie worked with archeologists and historians. They learned interviewing techniques and how to use primary sources to learn about the culture of civilizations. This project was followed by a second curriculum project that emphasized articulation and skill development across sixth, seventh, and eighth grade. Oscar and a younger colleague were recruited to join Annie in this effort. This time their initial learning experience was based on primary sources found in a Mathew Brady photography exhibit at Harvard's Fogg Museum. The museum curator introduced them to the history of photography, it's technological evolution, and how photography as an art form, provides insights into the cultural and historical period of its' subjects. It was a wonderful learning experience, but the teachers had to take what they learned and create curriculum that would allow them to share with their students some of these ideas: how to "read" photographs, how to interpret art to understand the historical period and the cultural norms and values of the time.

Annie explained why this authentic learning experience was both challenging and seductive:

> It's not the case that you go and you come away with the unit. You're not given anything. You leave with more questions than you answer. I think that's good because then you come up with the ideas on your own. But it's just a learning opportunity to broaden you're thinking about what you can bring back to the classroom to make it more powerful and interesting for the students.

The teachers at Mountain View were empowered by professional development. After powerful professional development, they saw themselves as having the ability to make change. For example, this same team of teachers had the opportunity to participate in the New Standards Project. They sat in huge ballroom and scored eighth grade portfolios from 37 states. Kathy explained the cumulative impact of the abundant and varied course of professional learning they had experienced:

> It gave you an opportunity to see what teachers were doing all over the country, and calibrate what you could expect of your students. Those are the kinds of experiences that empower teachers. They are all quite different types of experiences, but together they make up the rich, and challenging experiences that develop teacher leaders.

Through these exciting learning opportunities, the teachers from Mountain View developed an appreciation for high quality in-depth professional development from a number of positive experiences they had shared. Over the years, Kathy and Oscar developed a friendly rivalry trying to out do each other by securing the best professional development opportunity each summer. One summer they went together to the Library of Congress to learn to use the internet to access primary sources at the Library of Congress to use in developing curriculum. However, Oscar won the competition that year, when he was invited to spend three weeks at Monticello with other historians and history teachers, studying primary sources and writing curriculum, while immersed in the plantation life of the Jeffersonian era.

Oscar described his winning experience:

> That was three weeks of early American history, living at the University of Virginia and living out on the Lee Family plantation. It was non-stop field trips, experts coming in to speak about the American Revolution, early America. I think that the thing that I find that made that so wonderful was that the people who were there were all thrilled to be there. We had a shared interest, shared values. It was a very traditional kind of format. There were a lot of lectures and talks and that kind of thing but because the content was the draw for all of us, it was just an on-going three weeks of eyes open to the world of early Virginia. There wasn't a single lesson on pedagogy but we had to work on a project all through the time to earn our graduate credits and so we had a lot of great discussions, both with the experts and among [the teachers]. Sitting around the

> plantation there's not much to do. You can't go anywhere. So we all put together these fabulous projects. Great things came out of it. Working with documents, working with all kinds of things that we never would have found, or accessed or thought about unless we had been in that setting. If teachers don't seek out learning opportunities, if we're really not still learning, we can't communicate our enthusiasm to students.

These teachers came to value these labor-intensive projects, not as extra demands on their time, but as part of their regular work. In fact, they derived great pleasure and satisfaction from the projects where they invested the most effort.

> I found that the greatest fun was in the planning, the researching that we had to do, the working together with colleagues to really plan great units and make standards accessible for children, and then to look back at our work and reflect. Then documenting that work by writing professional articles was a natural growth progression. I realized from that experience, not only that people are interested in our work. I realized the need for us to go out an look at research and see what's happening. A lot of teachers don't read about their profession. Teacher leaders are readers, they know what is happening in research, they look for good ideas and they share their ideas. Teacher leaders are not possessive about their materials. It's probably the greatest form of flattery that other teachers want to use our materials.

Like Oscar's plantation experience, teacher leaders found other collegial learning communities by participating in intensive projects in their content areas. Four of the teachers in the study had at various times attended the state's history project conducted in collaboration with the state university system. (One of the teachers who went didn't even teach history!) All of the teachers found it to be an enriching experience because it had all the elements of quality professional development (Stigler & Heibert, 1999): it's focus was on improving the teaching of content and on student learning; teachers were engaged in both learning and developing new knowledge by doing research; it was collaborative among teachers and history scholars; and it occurred over an extended period of time.

The teachers felt the institute was powerful because they got to go back and be students and study again. It was an opportunity to learn more about cultures and current issues from experts in the field. The opportunity to become more knowledgeable in a particular subject area was particularly valuable for middle school teachers who were trained as generalists to teach at the elementary level. The institute allowed the teachers to use the library, to have time to do research, and to enhance their classroom teaching. They developed ideas about how to access primary sources, pictures, documents, assessments – tools they could take back to their classrooms to help students see how a historian looks at primary sources to make interpretations about history.

Similarly, Elizabeth underscored the impact the experience had on her practice:

> It was just great and it really changed my teaching because I walked away with a lot of pedagogy and excellent strategies and a real understanding of what is history. [....] I also had to produce a product. I produced a unit on Vicksburg. [....] To really understand the turning points of the civil way you have to understand what happened at Vicksburg. It was a strategic content piece for eighth graders U.S. history, and a lot of teachers don't know about it [because it's not included in any depth in textbooks] and I had to do a lot of research to understand what happened.

Rachel's participation in the Connected Math Project was a similar intense and powerful learning experience in her content domain. The mathematicians who wrote the curriculum trained a group of teachers to pilot the new curriculum. Rachel described the 'aha's' she experienced:

> They put us through our paces and the learning experience was waking up to the fact that I didn't have enough mathematics. They did some mathematics with us, but there was a whole issue of how much needs to be in the teacher's guide. How much do we need to bring to these activities? This is the investigative model with open-ended questions, which addressed issues I see across subject areas: ideas of logical reasoning, exploration, and summarizing. The challenge of orchestrating discourse among the students and the importance of discourse among the students with teachers, without the teacher leading that discussion is all new. And finally, for my particular subject area it was the whole area of algebraic thinking. [....] The Connected Math Project has a very strong focus on algebraic thinking and it just woke me up to the fact that we weren't doing that part very well. I personally saw connections in mathematics that I had never seen when I took mathematics at university, and that's a sad commentary. But the time and place when I took math was strictly formulaic. Those patterns and generalizations were not made. I thought this is the beauty that's been lurking in the back of my mind. [I realized that] I wasn't teaching children to love math, but now I think I have the tool that might.

Like Annie's and Elizabeth's experiences, Rachel's learning was reinforced when she had to produce a product in return for all of this training. She had to submit assessment results, critiques of the lessons, to be observed in her classroom, and she was asked to make a video of her teaching. Just putting all those pieces together was a learning experience, not unlike the process of applying for National Teacher Certification. Furthermore, Rachel observed, that the real learning occurs when one's current paradigms are challenged:

> It is professional learning that engages teachers in the struggle for personal and intellectual growth. Professional learning that raises questions about professional practice, are the experiences that shape leaders.

For most of these teachers, participation in some of these in-depth professional development experiences put them into a professional network that spurned new learning opportunities. In sharing their most powerful professional development experiences with each other, some of the math and science teachers lamented that many of their experiences lacked some of the critical features that made some of the other experiences so powerful. Rachel noted that there are too many workshops where they don't learn any mathematics. And, it was interesting that Samuel identified his most influential professional development experience as something that was completely outside of the profession. He worked for two years in the private sector in the corporate headquarters of a department store chain. One of the most important things he learned in business was how the whole process of career development within the business world is different from the way it had been for him when he entered education. In business, one goes out and develops a professional network. One develops a communication style. One identifies what is important and then develops a way of supporting your opinion. He noted that:

> [This] is something I don't think I knew my first couple of years as a teacher. I had some general ideas about how I wanted to do things, but I didn't go out and support myself. I really think that has colored the way I approach education now. I'm much more likely to pick up the professional journals. You go and do the background research in the professional journals, into the trends and the topics in your particular field.

The lack of role models in middle school math and science has, to some extent, limited these teachers' career development.

In addition to content area specialization, many of these teachers were involved with professional groups outside their specialty field. These experiences gave them a broader perspective of the reform issues across all of the content areas. These additional venues gave teacher leaders an opportunity to understand the bigger picture of school reform, including the change process, and developments in assessment practices. For example, Rachel joined NCSM, National Council of Supervisors of Mathematics, on the advice of one her mentors. She noted that the issues there were far more important to her than many at NCTM (National Council of Teachers of Mathematics), even though she maintains that she is in every way still a classroom teacher. But at this stage of her development as a leader, she needed that additional perspective. She also noted the perspective of the business world is eye opening as she cited Peter Senge's (1990) The Fifth Discipline as providing important insights about implementing reform efforts and restructuring schools into learning organizations.

A recurring theme across all of these experiences is that they learned the most when they were confronted with new challenges and pushed beyond their comfort zones. For Christy that was the situation when she began teaching prospective teachers at the university for the first time. This transition required her to re-examine all that she knows about reading, and then distill the parts that were most important. She explained,

> The one thing that I knew that I didn't want to do, I didn't want to teach my university classes like mine were presented to me because I still believe good teaching is good teaching, regardless. So it really required me to go back and find good ways to teach some pretty heavy duty theory and to also pick out the part that was most important and decide which parts I could leave out. So it really made me look more critically at all the theory that surrounds my profession. That was a powerful learning experience for me, to put that together. Then to actually hear from my students that it worked and was successful--I think that affected my practice in the classroom because I had to go back and look at what I was doing and how that meshed with my own belief system about theory and teaching.

It is obvious that this group of teacher leaders have had exceptional professional opportunities. Their talents and dedication have been recognized and nurtured to the point where they have internalized standards of excellence, and they continuously strive to be the best they can be. Sammi's analogy captures the exhilaration that these teachers have experienced when they conquer new challenges and exceed even their own expectations.

> What I want for myself is to be a learner. I want to learn so that I can get better at what I do. It's like driving a stick shift. I can drive the next level of car. I can move from a VW to a Ferrari. I can get better at my technique and I'm fast around the corners and I'm able to go a 105 miles per hour.

Looking across all these case examples, our findings are consistent with everything research (Little, 1993; Lieberman, 1995; Stigler & Heibert, 1999) has taught us about what is needed in quality professional development experiences, except perhaps, taken to even greater extremes. These extraordinary experiences share many common characteristics that instilled in the participants passion for their discipline and commitment to their mission in teaching children. First, and foremost these learning opportunities were purposeful; they integrated content standards, with pedagogical skills and assessment practices, while maintaining a focus on student learning. Their learning experiences were ongoing, over an extended period of time, with the support of dedicated colleagues, mentors, and professional networks, all of whom shared a passion for the subject matter. It required them to be active problem solvers, researchers, and practitioners in order to both generate new learning and to apply what they'd learn in meaningful ways, by linking theory to practice. Their training was intellectually rigorous and stimulating; they were challenged by experts and pushed beyond their comfort zones. And of practical importance, these experiences gave them both the opportunity and the time to learn.

We realize that there are specific skills that teachers need to be effective leaders. Teacher leaders need to develop reflective skills to examine their own beliefs and practices. They need to acquire communication and facilitation skills to orchestrate collaborative efforts with colleagues to implement change. But most important in becoming an effective

leader is the development of sophisticated expertise in pedagogical content knowledge and a professional network to support ongoing learning. The encouragement of respected mentors and colleagues, coupled with continuous nourishment of their intellectual interests through rigorous and challenging learning opportunities are the keys to keeping hope alive. These are the experiences that encourage the heart, and feed the desire to make a difference in the lives of the children they serve.

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